New Forms of Short Fiction

(From The Dial)

THE conditions under which the acted drama has been produced in different ages have come to be pretty well understood. The Greek theatres, however shattered and fragmental, have had their general dispositions made clear. Molière's data—his four trestles and a passion, along with a court audience—are fully comprehended. The Elizabethan stage, thanks to the studies of Mr. J. Brander Matthews and others, has issued from the dusk of conjecture—and from the deeper dusk of ignorance which did not even realize that there was anything in particular to conjecture about. It is now clearly understood that the details of playwriting and of play-producing have been greatly conditioned everywhere by the mere physical and mechanical means of publicity.

Some similar effort might be made on behalf of fiction,—ought to be made, in fact, if the character and aspect of much of the light reading of to-day is properly to be apprehended and appraised. How, in fact, have the modern equivalents for the choral altar and the inn courtyard, so to speak, made their influence felt? The fiction of the daily newspaper, of some of the weekly periodicals, even that of the "movies," will be seen in a different and juster light if the conditions governing publication are more clearly kept in view.

The serial published in monthly instalments somehow still holds its place. It seems the lineal descendant of those marvels by Dickens and Thackeray which, during the '40's, first saw the light in monthly "parts." In days when the stately quarterlies held the first place in the public attention and esteem, the month did not seem a large unit of time. But the weekly and the daily have made the month a small eternity. The monthly serial still lumbers along, but its goal seems all the time to be the bound volume or book publication. In one of these forms the magazine serial reconquers, in this day of short-breathed haste, its interrupted continuity, overcomes the disjointing of its consecutiveness.

The most striking example of fiction conditioned by method of publication is to be found in the daily press. This type of fiction confines itself most with the hitches and drawbacks of married life. One distressful couple, with subordinate figures and occasional simple changes of scene, quite suffices. Marion and Wilbur appear daily, to the extent of a column or so. The wife may be flighty and extravagant, the husband grave and patient. Or Wilbur may be dogged, ungracious, inconsiderate, and Marion sensitive and plaintive. Thus through every week-day of the year, with each section of the story more or less independent and self-sufficing. You go off for a week to New York, or for a month to San Francisco, or for a year to the Pole, and when you return Marion and Wilbur are having instalments of their familiar jars on the familiar scale. This might be called the angleworm type of fiction: short, choppy lengths, each one of them intelligible and available without exact regard for the other lengths. The worm so finely cut up seldom reassembles himself—fails, in fact, to turn back for a well-rounded finish.

The chief objection to this type of fiction is that, in point of characterization, it is static. Anything like real development, like true evolution, is absent. Wilbur, if dour and selfish and inconsiderate in February, is found to be none the less so in August. Marion, however, long-suffering when we left her in early summer, never reaches the point of open protest or rebellion by the end of December. The two creatures merely mark time, performing a shuffling dance that brings them no nearer a goal. Their manœuvres lend some color to the claim that the journey itself, not the journey's end, is the main consideration in humanity's mundane experience. Another objection to this type of fiction is that it must be written—or is written—in a "style" to coalesce with that employed in adjacent columns—an undistinguished style for undistinguishing people. Yet literature is like enough to fail when it addresses an ideal reader: that is as bad as to write for posterity, or to write—as Charles Lamb once threatened to do—for antiquity. One must write for the public that exists in one's own day. If that public is long on heedlessness and short on taste. . . .

Another form of fiction that is largely conditioned on publication at short intervals, for one definite body of readers, is the intermittent serial founded on the doings and adventures of a single individual: the biographical type. This individual is frequently a detective, more important or less important, whose doings (or triumphs; they are the same) rest on a basis blandly ratiocinative or speciously scientific. Recently the central figure of such a series has come to be, with frequency, a woman—a girl who moves through Western scenes as a kind of brash, self-confident special providence; or an elderly woman (English preferred) who composedly circulates as a globe-trotter through the wild waste spaces of the earth and sets things right when the local authorities fail. The serious objection to this type of fiction is that it, too, is static. The protagonist has one established character that is never modified or developed. Again, he always "comes through"—must, indeed, come through, if the series is to continue. Thus an important element, that of uncertainty, is sacrificed. If the author, miscalculating the public's interest, or failing to maintain his own, kills off his leading personage, there is but one thing to do: he must revive him, put him on his legs and start him again on his course. Another objection is that the real interest gets to be transferred to the subordinate figures which must constantly be fed into the series; sometimes, even, to the new environments in which these figures function. So that the death of the protagonist, even if premature, is not always a calamity; particularly in a certain kind of detective story, where the two necessary rules seem to be: first, write backwards; second, avoid characterization. Yet the established type of character always has held, and always will hold, its own against new, fresh, authentic studies. Imbedded in a series of stories of the biographical sort, it holds its own and meets a real need.

A plausible but exasperating form of fiction is one which is encountered in certain weeklies and runs through three or four consecutive issues. It is pseudo-autobiographical in character and may be called the telescope type. It purports to be the intimate, detailed experiences of a single individual, reported by himself. If such a fiction is represented as coming from the hand of a successful professional man, a man whose success has enabled him to penetrate to scenes which the less successful, however avid, have been unable to reach, and if it professes to handle with exactness and without reserve the financial details of the social advances of himself, wife, sons, and daughters, with what it all cost and how the cost was distributed,—then it is pretty certain to gain acceptance and vogue. Yet can any one doubt that a fiction of this sort is a mere compilation, drawn from a dozen "careers" real or imagined? "Mere," however, is not the word for such extended industry and such far-flung inquiry—or invention—as must enter into the composition of a social study of this type. The experienced practitioner, though he detects readily enough the essential humbuggery of the scheme, cannot withhold admiration for the hand that cast the net so wide and composed its heterogeneous haul to such an effect of compactness and plausibility.

"The Gold Bug," such a fiction might be named. And what is to prevent others of like nature? "The Bird of Paradise," for example, might telescope the social experiences of a dozen brilliant daughters of the fortunate, behind whose reiterated "I's" stands perhaps a robust, sardonic young man. "The Drudge," written not on a kitchen table but in some scented boudoir, will epitomize for us, in a fashion not too open to the charge of faking, the concentrated domestic routine of a hundred weary wives and mothers in lowly circumstances. And weekly numbers will carry the second instalment over the land before the impression created by the first has had time to dim. And the third will follow the second.

The tourist serial, an elastic, peripatetic affair which may be called the Pullman type, does not call for much attention, though it appears to be growing in favor. I presume it stems largely from the Williamsons. A small group of people, preferably incongruous, shift along past varied backgrounds, scenic or historical. If these people, men and women alike, have an easy command of slang, or even of the jargon of the sporting column, they will not make reading any harder for their creator's clientèle, nor his success any the less. All this presupposes, of course, a newspaper public, —one reading quite in the newspaper spirit.

The movies may profess to rest on a pictorial basis, just as the opera professes to rest on a musical basis. But scenario, no less than libretto, has a literary aspect that conditions fundamentally the whole work. The screen, indeed, by virtue of its many "leaders" and "inserts," bits of conversation, and facsimiles of letters and telegrams, is constantly concerned with literary expression. One would wish for "The Adventures of Anabel," for "Narrow-mindedness," and for "A Daughter of Heaven" an initial quality of thought that might make the enormous expenditure of time, effort, and money seem better justified. One inclines also to wish that the multitudinous bits of text thrown on the screen might be less pitifully awkward and illiterate. One might even suggest a literary adviser for the great producing studios, were it not for the fact that, to the masses, the second-rate is often more acceptable than the first-rate, and the further fact that, with minds of a certain calibre, finish abashes rather than gratifies.

About free verse as a new and practicable medium of fiction, I have already written in these pages. To the names of Masters, Frost, and Amy Lowell, in this field, may properly be added the name of Mary Aldis. Many of the pieces in her "Flashlights" are definitely called "Stories in Metre," and (however sharp-edged, bitter-tanged and disconcerting some of the themes may be) fully justify her title. They have a contemporaneity and an actuality that should not fail with a public whose chief reading is in the daily press, and yet possess qualities that make them acceptable on a different and higher plane.

To end with, these newer forms of fiction are conditioned not only by the vehicle of publication, but by the public state of mind and by the general average of public taste. If that improves, literature will improve in response. Yet why demand that it improve? To many persons art in all its forms is but a mere casual diversion. If one can enjoy what is currently placed before him, why put oneself out by trying to qualify for the enjoyment of something that would be sure to be different yet would not be sure to be more amusing? Recall the case of the two travellers who were once thrown together as roommates. Number One, seeing Number Two busy with soap, toothbrush, nail-file, and the like, exclaimed wonderingly, "How much trouble you must be to yourself!" But the best is not reached without travail. *Il faut souffrir pour être belle*—whether in body or in mind.

SOMETHING IN THE WIND

Sketches from a Doorway by Frank Bishell

Bacillus and Circumstance

Continued from Page Six

You must stop, even if you hate the stuff. Do you understand?

COTTONTAIL *(Hysterical)*—I can't stop, I can't stop; I never started, I can't stop——

DR. CONY—Very well, sir, I must insist on taking the only measure that will save your life. *(He steps to the door and calls)* Mrs. Cottontail, will you come here immediately?

(Enter Mrs. Cottontail.)

COTTONTAIL—My dear——

DR. CONY—If you please, madame. Let me explain first. You can have it out with your husband later. I'm sorry to tell you, Mrs. Cottontail, that your husband has gout. He has contracted it from excessive drinking. You knew, of course, that he was a heavy drinker?

MRS. COTTONTAIL *(Surprised, but not in the least incredulous)*—I couldn't go so far as to say I knew it.

DR. CONY—He must stop or he'll die.

COTTONTAIL *(Rapidly and wildly)*—I can explain everything, my dear. The doctor's all wrong. The whole trouble is somebody pulled the roof off the other day and stabbed me with a poisoned sword. I was right here in this room. I was just quietly reading The Evening Post. I knew no good would come of our moving into this new apartment house, with its fancy wire and green paint and free food, and all the rest of it.

DR. CONY *(To Mrs. Cottontail, who aids him in ignoring the patient)*—You can see for yourself, madame, just how rational he is. I leave him in your care, Mrs. Cottontail. Don't let him out of your sight. Try and find out where he gets his liquor. If he pleads with you for a drink, be firm with him. Follow him everywhere. Make him obey. It won't be hard in his enfeebled condition. I'll be around to-morrow. *(To Cottontail)* Remember, one drink may be fatal.

(Exit Dr. Cony.)

COTTONTAIL—My dear, it was a pink monster, with an enormous dagger. It lifted off the ceiling——

MRS. COTTONTAIL—Peter, can't you even be temperate in your lies?

COTTONTAIL *(Sinking helplessly in his chair)*—My dear, I was just sitting quietly, reading The Evening Post——

MRS. COTTONTAIL—You brute! I always had a feeling you were too good to be true.

COTTONTAIL *(Feebly and hopelessly)*—I was just sitting, reading The Evening Post *(his voice trails off into nothingness. He sits motionless, huddled up in the chair. Suddenly he speaks again, but it is a new voice, strangely altered.)* Mopsy, give me The Sun.

MRS. COTTONTAIL *(Looking at him in amazement)*—What do you say?

COTTONTAIL *(His muscles relax. His eyes stare stupidly. He speaks without sense or expression)*—The Sun! The Sun! The Evening Sun!

(He is quite mad.)

(Curtain.)

U-Boats and Naval War

Continued from Page One

first practical demonstration of the destructive possibilities of the underwater boat when in actual war conditions. In our Civil War Lieutenant Payne, of the Confederate navy, accomplished the first destruction of an enemy's cruiser when he sank the Housatonic in Charleston harbor. Robert Fulton built a "dive boat" for the French government early in the last century which gave fairly satisfactory results; while in the few decades preceding the present war Americans developed submarine navigation to the highest degree of perfection then known. Yet in the last few years German thoroughness, backed by the highest scientific attainments and technical skill, has developed this most difficult of all maritime navigation to a point where it actually defies the greatest naval power in the world—even in her home waters.

As has been said, it would be premature to predict that all above-water warcraft are to be consigned to the junk heap. So long as other naval powers maintain their present naval construction programme the United States must keep apace, but it must be evident to any intelligent mind that the submarine has come to stay and will form a powerful, if not decisive, factor in naval warfare of the future.